

## ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** December 12, 2013

**Agenda Item:** Madison Bighorn Sheep Transplant

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final Action

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

### **Background**

FWP proposes to reintroduce bighorn sheep into the Madison Mountains of southwestern Montana at either Indian Creek or Wolf Creek. Both areas were native bighorn sheep habitat, but bighorn haven't been documented in either area since the 1960s. The southern Madison Mountains support a healthy native population of bighorn sheep, although in the past the herd endured several all-age die-offs and had augmentations in the 1980s and '90s. The reintroduction would establish a long-term bighorn sheep population in Indian or Wolf creeks, increasing the overall herd size and distribution in the Madison Mountains. A viable population would provide new recreational opportunities to include wildlife viewing and hunting. Biologically, establishing a new wintering area for bighorn in the Madison would increase biodiversity and restore a native species winter areas after a 50-year absence. From a conservation perspective, increasing the number and distribution of viable bighorn sheep populations in Montana has a long-term survival benefit for the species.

The reintroduction faces few issues, as the release sites are removed from most domestic sheep activity and away from major public highways. Most expected bighorn habitat is on public land, private so landowner involvement is key to approaching the potential release sites, which are on private lands adjacent to the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area. The Wolf Creek landowners pledged support for the transplant in writing, as have the landowners for the potential release site in Indian Creek. However, the surrounding landowner at Indian Creek has yet to confirm or deny support pending the completion of the public process. Both reintroduction sites meet the criteria established in FWP's Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy (2010). The Indian Creek release site is further removed from the capture site; bighorn transplanted to Wolf Creek may be more likely to return to the source population.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

A draft environmental assessment was released Sept. 17 followed by a 52-day comment period ending Nov. 8. The comment period was extended in response to public comment. The public meeting held at the Ennis School on Oct. 8 was attended by 24 people. Thirty-five written comments were received. Of these, 32 supported some combination of release alternatives; one was opposed to the release; one was opposed to the release at Wolf Creek only; and one did not express an opinion. Of those supporting a release, 13 specifically supported release at Indian Creek (several would also accept release at Wolf Creek secondarily), 17 supported either release site, and two supported release at Wolf Creek alone.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

The EA includes three alternatives: Alternative A (No Action): no bighorn released. Alternative B (Preferred Action): 40-50 bighorn released at Indian Creek with possible follow up releases; Alternative C: 40-50 bighorn released at Wolf Creek with possible follow up releases.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

Accepting both Alternatives B & C allows FWP to proceed with the preferred alternative (release at Indian Creek) while accepting Wolf Creek as an alternative site pending the logistics of the release.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the Commission adopt the final decision to select both Alternatives B and C, and to transplant bighorn sheep into the Madison Mountains.